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6 RELIGION AND THE PW/MIA FAMILY

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Family Separation and Reunion

Families of Prisoners of War and
Servicemen Missing in Action

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Religion And The PW/MIA Family

"God was there with me and he helped me make the best of a bad existence".

Gaither, 1973

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Introduction

The church service held at Clarke Air Force Base by the released prisoners of war immediately prior to their return to the United States, their statements before the television cameras upon return, and the books written by returnees now beginning to appear in print: *Seven Years in Hanoi* (Chesley, 1973), *With God in P.O.W. Camp*, (Gaither, 1973), and *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (Rutledge & Rutledge, 1973), present convincing evidence that religion was, indeed, effectual in aiding these men to cope with the extreme stresses of their captivity experiences.

But what about the prisoner of war (PW) and missing in action (MIA) families? Were their personal religious beliefs helpful in coping with the prolonged and indeterminate period of husband/father absence, as the men's beliefs appeared to have been in dealing with their long captivity experience?

In a manual specifically written for Navy chaplains who minister to the families of prisoners of war and missing in action, the observation was made that although each man's experience differed, the "terrible experiences of the PWs were nonetheless more uniform than the variety of problems encountered by their waiting families" (Westling, 1973). Hunter and Plag (1973), in their survey of one particular group of PW/MIA families several months prior to the release of the prisoners from Southeast Asia, also found a great deal of variance among the families as to their social and psychological hardships associated with the PW/MIA situation. They found that while some families suffered on, the usual hardships related to any period of husband/father absence, other families experienced a wide range of difficulties.

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During the ten-month period prior to the return of the prisoners of war in early 1973, professional staff members of the Center for Prisoner of War studies in San Diego interviewed 215 Army, Navy, and Marine PW/MIA wives (McCubbin, Hunter and Metres, 1973). Interview data from that study showed that although almost fifty percent of the wives reported that their religious convictions had been very helpful to them in coping with the extended absence of their husbands, another twenty percent of the group had not found their personal religious beliefs a source of support in any way. During the period of husband absence, approximately thirty percent of the wives reported having consulted a minister or priest for assistance with emotional as well as other adjustment problems, and a similar percent indicated that they believed spiritual counseling services should be available to their families at the time of repatriation. Additionally, over forty percent of the women in this study group reported church activities to be a satisfying form of spending leisure time since the occurrence of their husbands' casualties. On the other hand, smaller groups of wives from this study reported that religion was either helpful at first but not later (11.2%), or not helpful immediately but became a source of support over time (4.2%).

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether those wives who reported that religion had been very helpful in coping with the PW/MIA situation in the McCubbin et al. study presented a pattern of coping behaviors or demographic characteristics which differed from those of the wives who indicated religion was of no value to them.

Procedure

A comparison was made between the group of 107 PW/MIA wives who had indicated religion as a source of help during husband absence (designated as the R Group) and a second group of 44 wives who had reported receiving no help whatsoever from religion (designated as the NR Group) in adjusting to their PW/MIA situation. Analyses were carried out to compare the between-group variance on a number of demographic factors as well as on physical, psychosocial, and role adjustment factors for both the wife and the children during the prolonged absence of the husband/father. A 2 x 2 chi-square test was used to determine the statistical significance of between-group differences.¹

1. Data analysis was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jerry Goffman, former Head, Data Analysis Branch of the Center for Prisoner of War Studies.

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One hundred fifty-one PW/MIA wives, including 51 Army wives, 21 Marine wives, and 79 Navy wives served as subjects. Sixty-seven of these women were wives of men classified as prisoners of war (PW), and 84 were wives of husbands classified as missing in action (MIA). The sample was predominantly Protestant (64.2%) or Catholic (25.8%), well-educated (almost seventy percent had continued their schooling beyond the high school level), and the average age was 32 years. Within the 151 families there were 289 children, ranging in age from less than one year to 25 years. Although twenty-nine of the wives were childless, the majority had either one or two children.

Results and Discussion

Demographic factors. Comparing the number of wives in each group who were 32 years of age or older, there were more older wives in the religious-oriented group (44.8% of the R group were 32 years or older; only 22.7% of the NR group were in that age bracket). It would seem that religion was a greater source of support or consolation for the older wife ($\chi^2 = 6.5$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). There was no statistically significant difference between the MIA wives and the PW wives with respect to their feelings about religion as a source of support. In addition, no significant differences were found among Army, Navy, and Marine wives as to whether religion was seen as helpful during husband absence. There was evidence, however, that geographical factors may be related to the wives' feelings about religion. In comparing the wives residing in the northern half of California ($N = 30$) with those residing in southern California ($N = 66$), it was found that significantly more wives ($\chi^2 = 4.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) from the group who found religion helpful resided in the southern part of the state. It should be noted that because a relationship exists, such a relationship does not necessarily imply that geographical location affects one's perception of religion. It may be that the wives who viewed religion as a source of assistance were also the ones who tended to move to certain areas to wait out their husbands' absences, or to move away from certain areas (e.g., from the military base) following their husbands' casualties. However, it is also possible that this finding may very well be attributable to the type of community in which they resided. This phenomenon cannot be fully explained on the basis of the existing data.

The finding that the two groups did not differ on average number of years of formal schooling (13.7 years for the R Group and 13.9 years for the NR Group) is perhaps in and of itself significant as it refutes the contention sometimes held that the less-educated turn to religion in times of crisis. While there was a small difference observed

between the religious background of the wife and whether or not she viewed religion as supportive (82.1% of the Catholic wives indicated they received consolation from their faith; 71.1% of the Protestant wives said that religion was helpful), this difference did not reach statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 1.7$, $df = 1$, $p < .20$).

Satisfying leisure-time activities. The two groups were compared on a wide range of activities in which they had participated and found satisfying during their husbands' absences (see Table 1). Both groups indicated high participation in hobbies, social group activities, and television viewing, but differed only slightly ($\chi^2 = 3.3$, $df = 1$, $p < .10$) on home participation projects (remodeling and redecorating), and significantly on church-related activities ($\chi^2 = 8.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). Despite the fact that wives frequently expressed the distinction that it was their own personally held religious beliefs which provided the source of help, and not the institutional church, it appeared that those who found religion very helpful were also the ones who found church activities more satisfying, and participated more frequently in them.

Satisfaction with the marriage. What were the wives' present feelings about their marriages after the long separations? A significantly greater number of those who reported religion as helpful still viewed their

TABLE 1. Leisure Activities Found Most Satisfying During Husband Absence

Activity	R Group		NR Group		χ^2
	Frequency++	Percent	Frequency++	Percent	
Hobbies	65	60.8	25	56.8	NS
Social Groups	42	39.2	19	43.2	NS
TV	41	38.2	18	36.4	NS
Sports	30	28.0	16	36.4	NS
Educational Classes	27	25.2	12	27.3	NS
Church Activities	30	29.7	2	4.9	8.9**
Remodeling/Redecorating	18	17.8	13	31.7	3.3+
Volunteer Work	18	16.8	10	22.7	NS
Movies	14	13.1	8	18.2	NS
Military Service Groups	5	4.7	1	2.3	NS

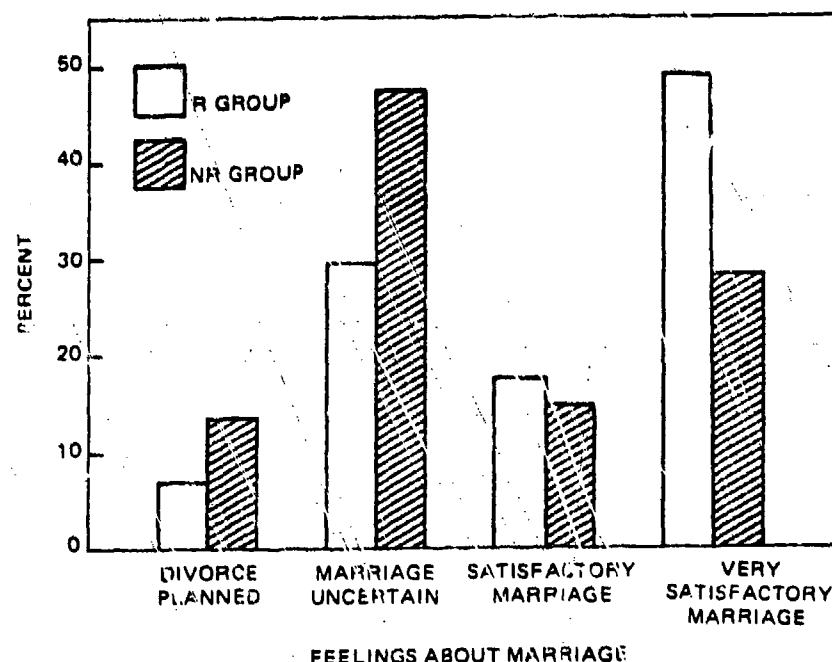
NOTE: The R Group contains those PW/MIA wives who reported that religion was very helpful in coping with their husbands' absences; the NR Group contains those who reported that religion was not a source of support for them.

++Number of respondents varied due to revised questionnaire.

** $p < .01$

+Approached significance ($p < .10$)

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marriages as satisfactory ($\chi^2 = 12.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). At the time of the interviews, over twelve percent of the NR group indicated that they were considering divorce, while only seven percent of the religious-oriented wives indicated that intention (see Figure 1). This relationship between high marriage satisfaction and support reportedly received from religion is congruent with the high value placed upon marriage by the institutional church, particularly the Catholic church.

Difficult areas of coping. During the interviews the wives were asked about the most difficult areas of coping experienced during the period since their husbands' casualties. Both groups mentioned the lack of the husband's companionship and their feelings of extreme loneliness, making all decisions alone, and the discipline of the children as difficult areas. However, none of the between-group differences was statistically significant.

When asked if there were any regretted decisions, small differences were found between the groups for their expressed regrets associated with "marking time" (23.1% of the NR wives had regrets; only 13.8% of the Rs) and dating (10.3% of the NRs; 5.8% of the Rs); however, the between-group differences were not statistically significant. On the other hand, significantly more wives in the non-religious group had

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TABLE 2. *Difficult Areas of Coping During Husband Absence*

Activity	R Group		NR Group		χ^2
	Frequency++	Percent	Frequency++	Percent	
Lack of husband's companionship	64	72.7	27	69.2	NS
Feelings of extreme loneliness	38	43.2	22	56.4	1.9+
Discipline of the children	17	36.4	7	35.9	NS
Making all decision: alone	37	42.1	12	30.8	NS
Lack of social life	26	29.6	9	23.1	NS
Guilt feelings	6	6.8	5	12.8	NS

NOTE: The R Group contains those PW/MIA wives who reported that religion was very helpful in coping with their husbands' absences; the NR Group contains those who reported that religion was not a source of support for them.

++Number of respondents varied due to revised questionnaire.

+Approached significance ($p < .20$)

dated during the husband's absence. Stated conversely, 54.6% of the wives who reported religion very helpful had never dated while only 31.6% of the other group had never dated ($\chi^2 = 5.6$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). This finding is consistent with the wives' present feelings of satisfaction with their marriages; if marriage is valued less, then one would expect the wife to be more apt to date and to have more guilt feelings about dating. This situation presented a problem for the PW/MIA wife, for if she was religiously oriented it appeared that she found it difficult to close the door on her past life and begin dating. During one particular interview a wife stated, "I had to give up my church because it was inconsistent with dating another man."

Anxiety-Depression symptoms. During the period subsequent to the husband's casualty, most wives reported experiencing a number of problems associated with anxiety-depression symptomatology, for example, sleep disturbances, feeling "down in the dumps," mood fluctuations, etc. The two groups were compared as to specific complaints and number of emotional problems reported. Depression was the most frequently mentioned symptom for both groups. None of the between-group differences for any of the symptoms covered was statistically significant; however, the largest differences were with respect to mood fluctuations, boredom, depression, and feeling that life was meaningless.

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TABLE 3. Symptoms Experienced by R and NR Groups During Husband Absence

Activity	R Group		NR Group		χ^2
	Frequency++	Percent	Frequency++	Percent	
Depressed, "down in the dumps"	38	35.3	18	40.9	NS
Rapid mood changes	25	23.4	16	36.4	2.7+
Jumpiness	38	35.5	16	36.4	NS
Sleep problems					
Fitful sleep	35	32.7	14	31.8	NS
Difficulty falling asleep	31	29.0	11	25.0	NS
Waking, early, not rested	25	23.4	13	29.5	NS
Feeling bored	19	17.8	11	25.0	NS
Headaches	24	22.4	8	18.2	NS
Poor digestion	17	15.9	7	15.9	NS
Feeling life is meaningless	9	8.4	6	13.6	NS
Shortness of breath	10	9.3	2	4.5	NS

NOTE: The R Group consists of those PW/MIA wives who reported that religion was very helpful in coping with their husbands' absences; the NR group consists of those who reported that religion was not a source of support for them.

++Number of respondents varied due to revised questionnaire.

+Approached significance ($p < .20$)

Suicide. There is often a close relationship between depression and suicide, and the wives were questioned as to whether they had ever contemplated suicide subsequent to their husbands' casualties. Their responses indicated that a significantly greater number of the nonreligious wives ($\chi^2 = 6.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) had entertained suicidal thoughts than had those wives who found religion supportive. Again, this finding appears to be congruent with the larger percentage of Catholics in the religious-oriented group and the traditional Catholic view on suicide.

Religion and the need for psychiatric treatment. Religion did not seem to be related to the need for psychiatric help on the part of either the wives or their children. This was indicated not only on the basis of those who had received treatment in the past, but also on the basis of those recommended by the interviewer as needing treatment.² The children within the two groups were also compared as to the frequency of a wide variety of physical, behavioral, and personal adjustment problems, without finding any significant between-groups differences. There was no indication from these results that wives who had

2. Based upon one-time, in-depth personal interviews lasting from two to eight hours, an evaluation was made by the interviewer as to the present need for psychological counseling for the wife and children.

TABLE 4. *Children's Feelings Toward Returning Father*

Feeling	R Group		NR Group		χ^2
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
Will not remember him	53	21.8	28	37.3	4.3*
Will blame him for deserting them	10	4.7	6	8.0	NS
Will treat him as an interloper	16	7.5	17	22.7	12.7***
Will resent him	32	15.4	31	41.3	21.6***

NOTE: The R Group consists of those PW/MIA wives who reported that religion was very helpful in coping with their husbands' absences; the NR Group consists of those who reported that religion was not a source of support for them.

* $p < .05$

*** $p < .001$

not received any religious support sought support either for themselves or their children from mental health sources.

As part of the interview, the mothers were asked how they believed their children would feel towards their father upon his return, and several highly significant differences emerged between the two groups (see Table 4). Those mothers who had not found religion helpful in coping with their husbands' absences reported that they believed the children would not remember their father, would be more apt to resent him, and would treat him as an interloper. Although it may be possible that these children would not remember their father simply because they were too young at the time he left to recall his presence (40.0% of the children from the NR group were eight years of age or under; 34.1% of the children from the R Group were in that age group), such an explanation cannot fully account for the difference. Perhaps the mothers simply had not taken positive steps to keep their children aware of father during his absence. These findings may also reflect the reorganization within the family structure with a closing out of the father's role. The present authors have noted that the "shifting of family roles, responsibilities, and the intensification of relationships among family members suggest the evolution of a family unit without the father" (McCubbin, Hunter and Metres, 1973). The mother's devolution of the marriage and her decision to begin dating point to a reorganization in process. Mothers may be overtly or covertly passing on to the children the message that father would not return. Although some mothers reported their children would view father as an interloper upon his return, this finding may not, in reality,

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reflect the children's feelings, as it could be projection on the part of the mothers who were moving out and attempting to attenuate conflicting inner feelings during the period of family reorganization.

Conclusions

From the findings of this study, the wife who indicated she found religion a source of support throughout her husband's absence had certain personal attributes which differentiated her from the wife who did not turn to religion for help in coping. She took an active part in church-related affairs to fill her leisure time. She was somewhat older than the wife who did not find religion helpful in coping with her limbo state. She was less apt to date, and she had fewer guilt feelings than her counterpart who found religion was not a source of emotional or personal comfort.

It is possible that the manner in which the PW/MIA wife perceived religion as a source of help was influenced by her early family background; it may also be a measure of the degree to which the family had moved on into a phase of family reorganization. Perhaps, even redecorating or remodeling the home symbolized for the wife a reorganization; that is, a sign of closing the door on the old life and starting a new one. Religion and "moving on" to a new life may be mutually exclusive; in this case, if the wife holds on to religion, she may feel too much guilt associated with beginning a new life for herself. Perhaps those wives who reported that religion was of no help were also those who had moved on towards a reorganization of the family and a closing out of the husband's role, but not without feelings of guilt and emotional ups and downs which, at times, included contemplation of suicide. Understanding the coping process and being sensitive to where the families are in their own adjustment is crucial, not only for the clinician, but for the pastoral counselor as well.

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→ PW/MIA wives who found religion helpful in coping with husband/father absence presented a pattern of coping behaviors and demographic characteristics which differed significantly from those of the wives who indicated religion was of no value to them.



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